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Montana Pupil Transportation News and Updates November/December 2002



A Monthly Newsletter Published by Pupil Transportation, School Budgeting and Accounting Division

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THE NUMBER OF PERSONS THAT CAN SAFELY SIT ON A SCHOOL BUS SEAT

Federal regulation does not specify the number of persons that can sit on a school bus seat. The school bus manufacturers determine the maximum seating capacity of a school bus. The manufacturers use this number, which is based on sitting three small elementary school age persons per typical 39-inch school bus seat, in the calculations for determining the gross vehicle weight rating and the number of emergency exits. School transportation providers generally determine the number of persons that they can safely fit into a school bus seat. Generally they fit three elementary school age persons or two high school age persons into a typical 39-inch school bus seat.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration recommends that all passengers be seated entirely within the confines of the school bus seats while the bus is in motion. Federal motor vehicle safety standard No. 222, "School Bus Passenger Seating and Crash Protection" requires that the interior of large buses provide occupant protection so that children are protected without the need to buckle-up. A protective envelope consisting of strong, closely spaced seats that have energy-absorbing seat backs provides occupant crash protection. Persons standing or sitting partially outside of the school bus seats will not be afforded the occupant protection provided by the school bus seats.

It would be appropriate to have a written seating management plan in place that would include driver training regarding the issue. The bus drivers would be responsible to make sure that students are appropriately seated (whether two or three to a seat). This plan would be a good management tool and an excellent driver training opportunity that would count towards the annual 10-hour driver-training requirement.

LOCAL NEWS

Board of Public Education Annual Transportation Report

The OPI will report to the BPE on the state of Montana's Pupil Transportation program at the January 15 meeting in

Helena. We have a lot of positive issues to talk about this year. One issue I will talk to the BPE about is:

Bus Driver Training

The driver-training program is beginning to take shape. I am pleased to report that in some areas, countywide driver training is beginning to take place. Drivers who were skeptical at first are beginning to see the value of being part of a larger group during training. When drivers share solutions and help each other resolve issues, the learning process is greatly enhanced.

Bob Sackman from Drummond is hosting a driver-training session on Saturday, March 15, 2003, in the Drummond Library, across the street from the High School. Training will begin at 8:00 a.m. Speakers will include Rick Flink from Operation Lifesaver, Virginia Deland from Parents, Let's Unite for Kids (PLUK), The Montana State Highway Patrol, and OPI Staff. Issues covered will include Railroad Crossings, how to request help when a special needs student your bus and you haven't had training, plus how to recognize and work with students that have different kinds of disabilities. The Patrol will help by providing guidance and insight into some of the new laws, dealing with the motoring public, plus they have a question and answer portion. OPI will provide updates on the 2002 School Bus Construction and Operations Standards, legislative updates and will answer questions as needed.

Bob Sackman is working hard to keep this training free to all who want to attend. Cookies and coffee will be provided, however attendees will need to bring a sack lunch. The training will be a full day long including a working lunch. All sessions will meet the needs of the driver training requirements. If you are interested in taking a group of drivers to this training, please call Bob at 793-5640.

Call me at (406) 444-3096 if you need help setting up training in your area. Also keep in mind that the June MAPT conference provides at least 10 hours of driver training in many and various ways that will count towards next year's training requirement. The conference fee is probably the best bang for the buck as we look for ways to meet this requirement. Contact Linda Michel at (406) 452-0082 for information concerning the MAPT spring conference.

Other options for driver training include the videos contained in the OPI Driver Training Library. The videos usually last about 12 to 23 minutes. Time spent watching and discussing the videos will count towards the 10 hours of annual training requirement.

OPI's list of driver-training videos can be found at www.opi.state.mt.us on the Pupil Transportation site.

Other options include renewing the first aid cards and driver training workshops planned cooperatively by schools throughout the state. Contact the County Superintendent or the District Superintendent in your area to set up training sessions.

Advanced Driver Training classes are provided in Lewistown. Call David Huff at (406) 444-4396 or Nancy Lunday at (406) 444-4432 for further information regarding these classes.

Documentation for driver-training should be kept in a driver-training file or in each driver file as is appropriate for each school. Please do not send documentation to the OPI. We will look during school monitoring and/or audits by school auditors.

The OPI presents position paper regarding lap/shoulder belts on school buses to the BPE.

While the OPI recognizes the perception that lap/shoulder belts would make the bus seem safer, we also recognize issues that may come into play when all aspects of this issue are carefully considered. The first item is the current high standard of safety of the school bus itself. School buses are designed in a way that provides the same level of protection that lap/shoulder belts would provide. Seat backs are high, well padded and their purpose is to contain the students in the area without tying them to the seat. For the containment area to be effective, the child must be in the seat, facing forward. School bus windows are small, providing fresh air when needed but not allowing a child to be thrown out as they can be when unbelted in a car. School buses have a consistent structural design that provides the utmost safety. Gas tanks have triple cage construction surrounding them to prevent puncture and resulting fire. All school buses conform to these strict standards, while other vehicles (including 15-passenger vans) do not.

It is difficult to talk about costs when the discussion revolves around the safety of children. In this case though, cost plays a huge role because students are already in the safest environment possible when they ride the "big yellow bus." Seating capacity will be reduced which will require additional buses to be purchased, drivers to be hired, and insurance to be paid. There are additional costs to maintain the buses and of course, the price of fuel to run them.

The questions being asked by parents, district personnel, transportation directors and bus drivers include:

1. Whose responsibility is it to see that the belts are adjusted properly and used appropriately?

2. Will seatbelts be used by students to inflict injury on other riders? If so, how will the district handle the increased liability and behavioral monitoring responsibilities?
3. How will we retrofit older buses that were not designed with lap/shoulder belts in mind?
4. Will the seats in older buses be appropriate for lap/shoulder restraint systems or will the seats need to be replaced?
5. How much will it really cost?
6. Will the older students use the belts and what will we do if they choose not to?
7. Montana Code Annotated MCA 61-13-103 states that if a vehicle has seat belts (of any kind) available, they must be used. What if a new bus comes that has seat belts already in it, even though we didn't order it that way?
8. Why is the driver belted and not the students? This question has been answered. The driver does not have the luxury of having the containment area surrounding them. The windshield faces them. The driver must be belted in to be able to stay in the seat and control the bus in the event of an accident.
9. Why lap/shoulder belts and not just lap belts? This question has been answered also. Statistics show that small people (adults and children) have been severely injured while wearing just "lap belts." For this reason, lap belts are not an option on Montana's big yellow bus.

This issue has been studied for many years. The transportation community has school bus safety at the top of the list when the lap/shoulder issue is discussed. If there were a way to make school buses safer, it would have already been done.

1996 through 2002 Transportation Statistics are available at www.opi.state.mt.us.

In the *Programs and Services* drop down menu, choose <Pupil Transportation>, go to *Hot New Topics* and choose <Bus and Pupil Stats>.

Since You Asked

When I am driving a school bus with a load of children on board and the bus in front of me stops to unload several students, what am I expected to do?

Until you stop to load or unload students, you are just like any other vehicle in traffic. Don't use your lights and don't open your door. The bus in front will stop traffic as needed.

When will OPI make the 1st semester transportation reimbursement payment?

The first semester transportation reimbursement will be sent to the county treasurer on March 23. Transportation is included when the State Aid payment is paid. Please make sure that all of the drivers have current certification and all buses are inspected. Check the TR-1 (Bus route and

reimbursement form) to ensure that the right bus is on the right route. The TR-1 was preprinted this year to help districts have more consistent reporting, however it is still up to the district to make sure that everything is accurate. If you have questions regarding this information, please call me at (406) 444-3096.

**Thanks to everyone for
PROMPTLY RETURNING THE TRAINING VIDEOS**

Treasure State Transit



I would like to thank Treasure State Transit for inviting me to their Christmas get-together on Friday, December 20th. The invitation to join the office staff and the drivers included a ride in the stretch. Of course, the driver was terrific and I really enjoyed everything. The food was great, too.

And then:

Buffy and Larry Woodring from B & L Transportation invited my husband and I to attend their Christmas party and meet the drivers. The party was held at the Silo's Inn out near Townsend on Sunday evening, December 22, 2002. Larry kept everyone laughing, the food was good and we had a great time. Thanks Larry and Buffy.



HAPPY HOLIDAYS



IMPORTANT DATES

December 10, 2002 High School TR-1's due to OPI (ARM 10.7.101)

December 25, 2002 Have a Merry Christmas (state holiday)

January 1, 2003 Happy New Year (state holiday)

Mid January 2003 TR-5's and TR-6's due to Districts from OPI (ARM 10.7.101)

January 31, 2003 Bus Inspections for 2nd semester must be passed by this date in order to ensure full funding is possible for the semester. (ARM 10.7.101)

February 1, 2003 TR-5's and TR-6's due to County from Districts (ARM 10.7.101)

February 15, 2003 TR-5's and TR-6's due to State from County (ARM 10.7.101)

March 2003 Transportation Aid Reimbursement made to Counties for distribution to schools

Update driver certificates, bus inspection forms, route information and Individual Transportation Contracts information regularly.